

Why is play important

Being interested and supportive of a child's play helps them to feel connected, valued and accepted. Having fun together during play time enables children to experience pleasure and joy.

Play helps children develop social skills

Play is important for learning the social skills (including language and communication) that develop over time, helping to build the foundation for future relationships.

Through play, children learn how to:

- Negotiate with others
- Understand how their behaviour can affect others
- Develop empathy
- Lead and follow
- Develop listening skills
- Establish meaningful relationships

Play helps children develop emotional skills

Through play, children can express their feelings, even before they have the words to say how they feel. Play also fosters imagination and becomes the basis for creativity in art, or music, or other ways of self-expression. These ways of personal expression can help a child to develop a greater understanding of their wellbeing.

Play can also help children learn impulse control. For example, if a child wants to build a sandcastle, but repeatedly knocks it down due to frustration, they have lost their sandcastle. However, through repeated play and often with some guidance, the child can gradually learn to manage their impulses and regulate their feelings to achieve their desired play outcome.

Play is a way that children can work through and resolve problems

For example, a child whose family has separated may feel very nervous about what's going to happen to them. These feelings and possibilities can be explored through play, in a safe and inclusive environment where trust has been established. For example, the child can practise having two homes by setting up two different play environments that resemble each home. Being near while the child plays and participating as invited by the child, helps to convey that they are supported and cared for.

Play helps children develop physical skills

Children like games that test their physical abilities (motor skills) – running, climbing, jumping and exploring. These activities can help them develop better coordination, balance, and strength. Play that involves children using their hands such as drawing, building with blocks or playing with small toys, helps to build fine motor skills. These activities help hand-eye coordination, grip strength and the ability to perform tasks that need precise movements.

Engaging in physical play can encourage children to develop healthy habits around staying active as well as helping to develop their confidence.

How do children play?

As children grow, the way they play will change. Examples of play for children of different ages includes:

Babies (birth to around 18 months)

With babies you might try:

- music, songs, gentle dance movements while you sing, using bells or containers filled with different objects. These activities can help develop hearing and movement skills

- objects of different sizes, colours and shapes to encourage a child to reach and grasp
- sturdy furniture, balls, toys or boxes to get a child crawling, standing and walking
- play with movement (for example, holding a baby while singing, swaying or gently dancing)
- play with words, such as in simple rhymes, animal noises, books, blowing raspberries and playing peek-a-boo.

Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

A toddler might enjoy:

- big and light things like cardboard boxes, buckets or blow-up balls to encourage them to run, build, push or drag
- chalk, rope, music or containers can encourage jumping, kicking, stomping, stepping and running
- hills, tunnels or nooks that encourage physical activities like crawling and exploring
- experimenting with different sounds and rhythms (try singing, dancing and clapping along to music with your child).

Preschool children (around three to five years)

Ideas to get your preschooler's mind and body going:

- Old milk containers, wooden spoons, empty pot plant containers, sticks, scrunched-up paper, plastic buckets, saucepans and old clothes are great for imaginative, unstructured play.
- Simple jigsaw puzzles and matching games like animal dominoes can help improve your child's memory and concentration.
- Playdough and clay can help your child develop fine motor skills.
- Favourite music or pots and pans are great for a dance concert or to make up music.
- Nature Play can provide opportunities to connect with and explore the natural environment.
- Balls and frisbees can encourage kicking, throwing or rolling. When encouraging your child to kick or throw, try to get them to use one side of their body, then the other.

School-age children

School-age children can have fun with the following objects and activities:

- Furniture, linen, washing baskets, tents and boxes are great for building.
- Nature Play can provide opportunities to connect with and explore the natural environment.
- Home-made obstacle courses can get your child moving in different ways, directions and speeds.
- Rhymes or games like "I spy with my little eye, something that begins with..." are great for word play and help develop literacy skills.
- Simple cooking or food preparation like measuring, stirring and serving food is great for developing numeracy and everyday skills.
- The child's own imagination – with imagination, children can turn themselves into a favourite superhero or story character.
- If they're interested, you could consider getting them into some sports or team activities for school-age children. Other possibilities include after-school or holiday art and craft activities.

Be You Resources

Learn more about [supporting learning through play](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Explore strategies and practices for developing social and emotional skills in the [Learning Resilience domain](#).

Bibliography

Visit [Why is play important](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

External links

Early Childhood Australia - [Statement on Play](#)

Raising Children Network – [Toddlers: play & learning](#) / [Preschoolers: play & learning](#) / [School age: play, media & technology](#)

